"HER SON"

Files

Characters (Order of Appearance)

Sylvia Turner

Village Postman
An Enemy Army Officer
Martha (An old peasant woman)
Karl (Her son)

Setting: The kitchen in Martha's cottage. There is a stove against the right wall, with a pot and kettle on it. Kitchen utensils hang on nails on the wall behind the stove. An empty wood box is beside it. A square, latticed window is left of centre back. The door leading outside is left back. Another door, leading to an inner room is right, just above the stove. A heavy wooden chest is against the left wall. A kitchen table stands about centre. A wooden armchair is downstage, near the stove, and there is a plain wooden chair at the table.

On the right of the window a bear skin is nailed on to the wall, and below it is a row of woodsman's tools - axe, mattock, etc., standing against the wall.

Through the window, and the door when it is open, can be seen the red trunks and dark foliage of fir trees which grow nearly up to the cottage door.

When the scene opens, golden shafts of sunlight streaming through the trees, are seen through the window and open door. As the scene progresses, the light turns to the red glow of sunset, then to dusk.

"HER SON"

Scene: The kitchen of Martha, the old Peasant woman. (As the curtain rises on Martha's kitchen, the outer door opens, and there enters the Army Officer, closely followed by the Postman. The officer is a big man of 45, ruddy, virile, his naturally good-humoured face has on it a look of authority and determination. He steps into the kitchen with the air of a man bent on overcoming expected opposition, but he stops short with some surprise in finding the room empty. The Postman is a man in his fifties, thick-set and somewhat insignificant. He is wearing a belted woollen jacket - his mail bag is slung over his shoulder. Obviously more at home than the other, he waits for instructions uneasily.

Officer: No one here? This is the cottage you spoke of, Postman?

Postman: Yes, Captain - this is where old Martha lives. If you want to have the quiet of the forest and yet be near the village, this is the place. No one comes here.

Officer: I must be in touch with my men. How is your village going to accept them? You are peace-loving folk, I can see, and now the war has touched you at last.

Postman: You are wrong, Sir. The war touched us when our boys went, that first month. Now you - the enemy - have brought war to us in a different way - not worse - different. Perhaps we feel that at last we are sharing what they have known.

Officer: (briskly) Well, have it your own way. I've got the men billeted pretty well now, and it's time I thought about my own quarters, before the sun sets. I commend your judgement, Mr. Postman, I shall be very comfortable here I think. (crosses to stove and lifts lid of pot) That's good soup by the smell.

Postman: Yes, Sir, but----

Officer: (seating himself at table, checking list) But what, man? Speak out. Where is the good woman who lives here? Why isn't she home when her supper is cooking?

Postman: She will be milking her goat, or gathering firewood, Captain. No doubt Martha will be with us in a moment - but -

Officer: But - but - man! What's the trouble? Out with it. Is she dirty - a thief - a bad cook?

Postman: No, no sir - Martha bakes the best bread in the village. Her cottage is always clean as the Captain can see for himself (hesitates)

Officer: Well, go on, man.

Postman: Martha may not receive you very kindly, Sir. Her husband was killed in the war in 1917. She has no love for -- strangers.

Officer: (laughing) Is that all you are worrying about? Does an invading enemy expect the inhabitants of the country to welcome him with open arms? Come man, have sense. The villagers have taken the occupation very quietly, very quietly indeed - and I haven't lived through nine months of war to be afraid of an old woman.

Postman: No, Sir - but Martha - she is a strange one, captain. For the last twenty years or more she has kept away from the village folk. Perhaps we all fear her a little.

Officer: In spite of her good bread and tasty broth? Come, come, I shall do very well here, and can introduce myself to our good Martha when she appears. Be off on your rounds, man. Perhaps you'll not have many more days of delivering letters.

Postman: You are right there, sir. Our people have had their news from the lads at the front till now. Often it has been delayed, but mostly the letters have come through at last. But now--

Officer: Now the railway is in our hands. Public utilities will be controlled by us. As for news of your men fighting--

Postman: Time must be the Postman now, sir, and he will not deliver all the letters that wre written. Well, I must continue my round, perhaps for the last time. But there's something to be done before I go. I have a letter for Martha - not the letter she's expecting - no,no, I know that writing well. Bad news, I fear, bad news.

Officer: Stop mumbling. Give me the letter. Come, hand it over. From now on all your mail, if it gets through at all, will have to be censored by us. You quiet country folk will have to learn what war means.

Postman: Yes, sir, no doubt we shall learn. If you say I must give you Martha's letter, I must. But beware of her, it's not good to cross her path. (he hands over the letter, and turns to the door. The Officer in fingering the letter, back to the door, when Martha appears in the doorway, carrying a small wooden bucket of goat's milk. She is a gaunt old woman of 60 or more, tall and stooped, dressed in rusty black, with a crimson wool shawl around her shoulders. Her face is wrinkled, her bright, dark eyes deep-set. The officer's back is to her. Her whole face lights up for an instant, as if it is someone she is expecting. Then realizing that he is a stranger, she withdraws into herself again. She turns to the Postman)

Matha: You have a letter for me in your bag. Yes, I am sure of it. Give it to me - give it to me! (the Postman looks uneasily at the officer and

shakes his head. Meanwhile the Officer has thrust the letter into the pocket of his overcoat. He turns.)

Postman: Don't you see there is a stranger here, Martha?

Martha: I see him. What does he want? Why do you bring a stranger here?

Officer: That is easily explained, my good woman. Perhaps in your quiet cottage in this dark forest you forget that a war is being fought. (Martha makes no sign, but watches him like an animal)
Now the war has come right to your own village - this cottage. Troops are being quartered in the village - each family must take its share - two, three, five, as many as the house can bear. You are poor and alone, so only I myself will be billeted here. Do you understand?

Martha: (dully) I understand.

Officer: (to Postman) Now you can go, because everything is arranged. As you see, there will be no trouble.

Postman: As you say, Captain. There will be no trouble. (he hesitates, shrugs his shoulders, then exits)
(the Officer seats himself in the wooden armshair, downstage, by the stove)

Officer: Now let us understand one another. I am a simple man and a quiet one - not like some of my boisterous lads down in the village. How long we shallbe here, I don't know....ten days - three months - it doesn't depend on me, you understand. I have my orders from my superior officer, and you take your orders from me. Here they are. At eight o'clock every morning bring me hot water for washing and shaving - plenty of hot water. At eight-thirty have my breakfast ready on the table here - some of your good bread and coffee. I shall be away all day in the village until sunset - say about this time, and then on my return, I shall expect my supper to be ready for me. What fare do you have? -- Are you listening?

Martha: I understand the Captain - breakfast and supper and plenty of hot water. I can give the Captain fresh eggs, a fowl now and then. Perhaps the old men in the village will share some rabbits or a partridge. There's no one here now to hunt in the forest for me.

Officer: Capital. We understand one another. Attend to your household business quietly, and leave me free to attend to my duties as a soldier, and we shall not trouble one another.

Martha: We shall not trouble one another - no, Captain.

Officer: Now show me where I'm to sleep. (he picks up his haversack from the table. Martha goes to the door above the stove, opens it and stands back)

Officer: (looking in) Those are men's clothes on the wall. Whose room is this?

Martha: Karl's. It is my son's room, of course.

Officer: Where is he?

Martha: He's away fighting now, but some day, perhaps soon, he will come back. His room is always ready for him.

Officer: So he's away fighting? A soldier, eh? Well, good mother, it will do his room no harm for me to sleep in it for a while. I hope for your sake he does come back some day.
(He is in and out of the room during this speech)

Martha: He will come back - oh yes, he will come back. Perhaps sooner than we think. The war may be all over any day, then he will come back, walking in through the door - any day, any day. Sometimes I think he will write me a letter to say he is coming, and sometimes I think he will just come walking in. (she chuckles)
(when she mentions a letter, the officer stops on his way to the bedroom, startled, hand in pocket. Then he goes into the bedroom and shuts the door)
(Martha lays a place for the officer at the table, facing the audience. She stirs the pot, lifts bread from the oven while she talks to herself)

Martha: He doesn't like me to talk about Karl. I think he's afraid of Karl, but my son never hurt anyone. No, he never hurt any living creature. The deer in the forest would talk to him, and put their soft noses into his hand, and the tits and the wrens would fly on to his shoulder. They won't come for me - Karl could whistle their tunes. I'M just an old woman - an old woman.
(the officer enters from the bedroom without his overcoat)

Officer: Now let's have that soup of yours. Is that new bread I can smell? I haven't smelt homemade bread since I was a boy. Where we lived in the country, my mother baked bread every Saturday.

Martha: You have a home where they bake bread? There are many good, quiet homes among your people, I know. Why do you leave your good homes where they bake bread, to come here and take our land? (officer shrugs his shoulders, and sits at table)
(Martha pours soup from pot into bowl and serves the officer)

Martha: Our people and your people have lived side by side, we have mixed up together even. I have no hatred in my heart for any of your people. Why should we be fighting?

Officer: Now that's a big question, Martha - too big for me to answer - at least before I've had my supper. Can you spare me a glass of your goat's milk, warmed a little?

Martha: (grumbling) Karl could always make things clear to me. Yes, the milk's there to be drunk. But if you want it hot, I must get some more sticks - the fire's getting low.

Officer: (finishing his soup and rising) I'll get the sticks. Put the milk on to

warm while I'm getting them. (exit officer)

Martha: I'll put the milk on the fire when he brings the sticks. There's no man going to tell me how to do my cooking. The milk can wait.
(she crosses to the wooden chest against left wall. Takes out a dark blanket. Goes into bedroom with it. Returns with officer's overcoat which she hangs on a hook beside the chest. She grumbles to herself a little)
(the Officer returns, and stands hesitating in the doorway, the sticks in his hands)

Officer: There's something that belongs to you in one of the pockets. You may take it. (he crosses to the stove and puts on the sticks. Martha, bewildered, finds the letter. Looks at the writing. Shakes her head.)

Officer: Aren't you going to read it?

Martha: It's not from Karl. What does it mean?

Officer: Well, it's addressed to you. Why not open it and read it? (he resumes his supper, but he is obviously interested in the letter)
(Martha crosses to the stove. She puts milk into saucepan and places it on the stove. Then she sits in armchair, takes out spectacles and opens and reads letter slowly. Her face registers bewilderment, then dismay)

Martha: (In a whisper) What does he mean? I don't know what he means.

Officer: What's your news?

Martha: (turning to him slowly) It's from a boy Karl used to know. They went into the army together. I don't understand.

Officer; Give me the letter. (He rises and takes it from her - reads) "To Karl's Mother. This is to tell you some bad news about Karl. We've been in some hard fighting for days - maybe weeks - I don't know. Karl and I tried to keep together but I'm afraid he's gone now. One of the boys saw Karl wounded in the head when we were trying to hold a village. It's no use to write the name. The enemy took the village - I'd go back to look for Karl if I could, but we've been pushed back from there maybe twenty miles. I thought maybe the government wouldsend you a letter or a telegram to say Karl was missing, but I wanted my letter to come first. Keep hoping." (the officer puts the letter back into Martha's hand and resumes his meal)

Martha: What have they done with Karl? Where is he now?

Officer: No one can answer that. It's one of the things that happens in war... that some of the boys never come back.

Martha: It can't happen to Karl - I tell you it can't happen to Karl. His father never came back, but he must come back.. Who are the people

who tried to kill him? Was it your solders? Was it you?

Officer: I can tell you nothing about your son. The milk will be hot now. Give it to me please.
(the red glow of sunset is streaming through the window)

Martha: Wait a minute, wait a minute. I know when milk is hot enough. You can't make me forget about Karl. I told my sonwhen he went away to fight he was to remember how his father had been killed when he was a little boy, and to strike a blow for his father. And now both are gone - father and son, father and son, and who is to strike the blow? (she has been rocking herself, but now she sits upright)
It's Martha, old Martha - she is the only one left to strike the blow now. And where is the blow to fall, eh? Can you tell me that? Where is the blow to fall?

Officer: (quietly) I don't like threats. They are dangerous to the people who make them.

Martha: Dangerous, eh? I'm not afraid of danger. Martha can strike one blow for husband and son, one life for two lives, eh? Then they can do what they like to old Martha.

Officer: (coldly) That is foolish talk. I would kill you long before you could touch me. I could use my troops to wipe out your whole village.

Martha: Kill me, yes, but destroy the village? No, captain, no, you could never do that. You see the houses, and the shops, and our little church, and you think that is the village. No, the village is the people. You could never lay your hands on them - they would slip through your fingers like sand. Do you think that all the folk of the village are living down there now? Why, it's just the old people, and the babies, and the soft, fat, comfortable ones, - the banker and the lawyer - who are there. Not the real village people.

Officer: Where are your real people then?

Martha: (laughs) I don't know, Captain. Karl would know if he were here. (she rises and lifts the lid of the saucepan) He knows all the caves on the hillsides, and the wild thickets in the forest - and that's where the real people are - those who are not able to fight. (she pours the milk into a mug) But Karl would never tell you. -- Karl! Where are you? You think I'm just an old woman talking, but you'll see - If Karl is dead, Martha will have her revenge.

Officer: So! And how will you kill me?

Martha: (quietly) Poison! (she puts the mug of milk in front of him. He looks at it, sees she is watching him shrewdly - shrugs his shoulders, drinks some of the milk, and puts down the mug half empty)

Officer: Now that's enough, We'll talk sense and understand one another as we did before.

Martha: You mean, Captain, that you'll talk and I must understand you?

Officer: No, I mean that we must understand each other. Sit down. (Martha sits in armchair. He leans across the table towards her)
Now listen. You could do Karl nothing but harm by attacking me. Don't you see? I have only to go down to the village and order some of my men to come up here. They would seize your cottage, drive away the goat, and turn you into the forest. It's as easy as lifting my finger to give that order. Now suppose Karl is still alive (Martha turns towards him eagerly) Why shouldn't he be? If he managed to escape where would he try to make his way?

Martha: (under her breath) Home -- home.

Officer: Of course - home. Now suppose he came here tomorrow - or next week - and found enemy soldiers living here - his mother gone - how would he feel? You are angry that we are here. I understand that feeling. But this war can't take notice of separate individuals. We are just small, unimportant people in it. You are helpless, I am not.

Martha: Helpless, yes, helpless.

Officer: Now, let's drive a bargain, you and I. You want to be here in your neat, cosy, little cottage when Karl returns, if he does. Poor soul, she believes me (Martha is staring in front of her, smiling) I want to live here for a while - perhaps not long.

Martha: Not long.

Officer: If you will behave calmly, and stop this wild talk, I will give you my protection by living here. No one shall interfere with you -- all shall go on as before. Do you agree?

Martha: (nods) No more wild talk.

Officer: Capital. I knew you were a sensible woman. (he pushes back his chair and rises) Now I must be off. My sergeant major will be wondering what's happened to me.
(sunset is passing into dusk. Martha is silent, clearing away the dishes, shaking her head a little, and muttering, but almost cheerful. The officer goes into the bedroom and returns with a map)

Officer: Is there a short cut through the forest? The postman said something about one. I'm late enough already.

Martha: The forest trails are lonely and dark when dusk has fallen. Would the captain not be afraid he might meet a wolf or a bear? (she peers at him and chuckles) (the Officer hesitates, not knowing whether or not she is making fun of him)

Officer: Bears? Nonsense - not in this settled country.

Martha: (still chuckling) Oh, yes, there are bears. There was a big black one that used to prowl around the cottage at night. Karl said it would do us no harm, but one night it frightened me. My goat had a new kid, and I went out to the shed to see if they were warm and comfortable for the night. The moon was shining through the fir trees, and the stars were bright. As I went around the corner of the shed, there was the bear. He startled me, oh how he startled me! I screamed, and Karl ran out with his woodsmen's axe. He came round behind the bear and struck it a great blow - he is so strong - and the bear fell stunned, and he killed it... Karl who hated to kill a living creature. But he loved me, his mother, more than even the wild animals, and if I was frightened or in danger, he would be quick to strike - just as I would be quick to strike for him - oh yes! I'd be quick. There's the bear skin on the wall, sir, to prove my words.

Officer: Hm, well, it's dark now for finding a forest trail for the first time. You shall show it me by daylight, and I'll soon know it well. I have a gun, you know. (He touches significantly the revolver in his belt) (he takes his overcoat off the hook, puts it on and is buttoning it when he sees that Martha's attitude is tense, she is listening - he listens too, then steps back flat against the wall alongside the window. Something white gleams for a moment at the window and is gone. Martha is still rigid by the stove, back half to audience, attention focussed on the door)

Officer: (quietly) Would one of the villagers be likely to call on you?
(Martha shakes her head, hardly heeding him)

Officer: Could it be a wild animal from the forest?
(Martha makes no answer)

Officer: (very quietly) Step over to the door, open it, and tell whoever is out there to come inside. (Martha pauses a moment, then crosses to the door, opens it and peers into the darkness. She leans forward, then draws back, holding her breath. Stumbling steps are heard - a wounded soldier stumbles across the threshold, and collapses on the floor inside. Martha shuts the door, bolts it, then stands over Karl, looking defiantly at the officer. He shrugs his shoulders, turns away and seats himself in the armchair, downstage by the stove, lights a cigarette, but keeps his gun on his knee. Meanwhile Martha has tried to raise Karl. He gets to his feet, stumbles forward supported by her, then collapses again near the front of the table. He is wearing a torn and dirty uniform -- one side of his head and face is covered with a dirty bloodstained rag bandage. Martha brings the half-drunk mug of milk and holds it to his lips. He drinks, chokes a little, sits up more, and tries to take in the situation. Martha is behind him, caressing him, but always watching the officer.

Officer: So this is Karl. You've chosen a bad moment to come home, soldier. We are here ahead of you, and your village is no longer a peaceful spot to hide in.

Karl: (to Martha) Are there enemy troops here? When did they come? What's happened?

Officer: The war's got ahead of you a little, soldier, that's all. It's some days, I take it, since you saw your regiment? (Karl nods dully) Well, better make the best of a bad job. We are the winners and you are the losers this time. (significantly) You can rest a little first.

Martha: No one is going to take Karl away. He's home. This is his own home. No one can touch him here.

Officer: (to Karl) You know the rules of the game, corporal. I might have stumbled into your hands, but as it is, you can see for yourself that you're my prisoner. Take your time - I can wait.

Karl: Prisoner! God - have I gone through hell for that ? Mother, you can't think what it was like. We had to hold the village, but they were shelling it - it was hopeless. Then the order came to get out quick, but the stones and mortar were falling all around me - the dust was thick in my throat - I couldn't see. (He breaks off, almost sobbing)

Martha: It's no matter now, Karl, let your story be.

Karl: No, I must tell you, Mother, I can't get the noise of the shells out of my ears, the whistling and the zoom, and the great shuddering crashes. The buildings were falling all around us, and we dodged through the streets like - like hunted rabbits, trying to find their holes. Then there was a flash in my eyes, and my head felt on fire. I don't know - I forget the rest. I think a long time must have passed. It was nearly dark, and a grey rain was falling. It was all so quiet, but far off in the distance there were flashes of light in the sky, and the guns were rumbling.

Officer: How did you get out of that village?

Karl: (He speaks with an instinctive respect for the authority of an officer) That was easy, sir. If you can get through the forest on a dark night so that the creatures don't hear you, you can get through a few back lanes with some grey light to show things up, and the rain to deaden your footsteps. It was just that my head felt light. I couldn't help my balance very well. When I got clear of the village I took off my shirt and tore it into strips - the blood was trickling into my eyes.

Martha: Your poor head. I'll get some warm water to bathe it, Karl.

Karl: (clutching her skirt) No, Mother, stay by me. I want to feel I'm home.

Martha: Safe at home, Karl.

Officer: How long were you out in the open? What route did you take?

Karl: (suspiciously) I'll not tell you that. It's easy to get home when you know the country, when it's your country. I slept in the open four nights, and the fifth night I'm home.

Officer: (with an effort) Well, we've heard your story. You've had your minute's grace, and now I don't have to tell you what comes next. You're my prisoner. Can you walk? You know how far the village is. (he avoids looking at Martha)

Karl: Will you take a wounded soldier prisoner?

Officer: ;Would you prefer a bullet from my gun? Come now, I'll make it as easy for you, for your Mother, as I can. You've walked enough. Now stay here, give me your word that you'll not try to escape, and I'll send some of my men down with a jeep to fetch you. Will you do that? (Martha and Karl are obstinately silent)
Don't be fools. If you took to the forest again You'd soon be caught. Besides, would you leave your mother in our hands?

Karl: (sullenly) What will you do with me?

Officer: You know that without being told, corporal. Prison camp, till the war is over. But we'll have a doctor look at the wound in your scalp. We treat our prisoners well.

Karl: Prison! I couldn't breathe in a prison! Sir - (he leans forward) I'm at your mercy. It makes no difference to you whether I'm taken prisoner or not. You see what it means to my mother if you take me away. I'll live in the forest - forget you ever saw me, come through that door - you were asleep by the fire. When I came near the village no one saw me. They'll all think I'm dead. I'll not come to life till the war's over, and this is all forgotten.
(the officer shakes his head resolutely)

Martha: You may refuse to listen to a soldier who's an enemy, but you can't refuse to listen to an old woman whose bread your've eaten. You said yourself, captain, that this war is bigger than any of us. You'll let this little wounded animal slip out of the trap. You couldn't have the heart to take him now. (the officer hesitates, then sits up resolutely, straightening his tunic).

Officer: I have my duty to do , and there's no way out. (Martha slides open the end drawer of the table) War has nothing to do with sentiment, with homes and mothers. (Martha slips a butcher knife under her apron)
It means killing or being killed. If you weren't a sick man, you'd realize that without being told.

Karl: (intensely) I'm not too sick to know treachery when I see it.

Officer: (raising his voice angrily) There's no treachery.

Karl: I tell you there is, You come to my mother's house, she's old and feeble, with no one to defend her. You eat her good food and warm yourself at her fire, then turn on her and detroy all she has to live for!

Martha: Hush, Karl, you will do no good. The fire is getting low. (she crosses to the stove and stands behind the officer, waiting and watching. Karl knows nothing of the knife in her hand. He is beside himself with excitement.)

Karl: I'll show you I'm strong enoughto beat you yet! (he half rises on his knees, trying to get to his feet)

Officer: (sitting up in his chair and pointing his gun) Lie down, you fool - you crazy fool.

Karl: I'm not - I'll show you - I'll

Officer: (shouting) Keep down or I'll shot you!
(he begins to rise, gun in hand. Martha plunges the knife into his back. The officer's gun goes off simultaneously. Karl slumps forward, dead. Martha takes a step to the table and leans on it, looking at her dead son, a look of frozen, hopeless grief upon her face.

(Slow Curtain)

Sylvia Turner.
Rupert's Land School,
Winnipeg,
Manitoba.